THE ROLE OF IDENTITY-REMEMBRANCE IN THE SYRIAN REFUGEES' ADAPTABILITY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article examines self-perception and its impact on the adaptability to new living contexts symptomatic of different socio-cultural and religious/theological identity-formation contexts. By relying on an interdisciplinary hermeneutic, it touches upon the issues of selfhood and otherness from an interdisciplinary theological and social-theoretical perspective by laying its foundations deep in the connections of theological/religious and cultural perceptions of the identity formation of displaced people in their new host life-settings. Such connectedness is demonstrative of self-perception trajectories, which foreigners go through in their attempts at integration and adaptation, or lack thereof, to the new and challenging living spheres they join. The article focuses on the Syrian refugees in Europe and analyses how their religious or theological self-perception relates to their confrontation with the new challenge of forming a new self-identification strategy that can enable them to answer the question 'who am I?' in the heart of their strife to exist in their new expatriate lands. The article touches upon this complex and multi-faceted matter from the specific perspective of the role of memory and remembrance in the journeys of self-perception and identity reformulation of these Syrians and their hosts, and in their religious and cultural ramifications.

Keywords

Syrian refugees; Self-perception; Religio-cultural identity; Integration; Anamnesis; Amnesia

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Today social anthropologists, sociologists of religion, and socio-political theologians principally concur that all religiously-embedded self-perception and identity-formation processes are naturally rooted in historiological, cultural, and religiously-grounded webs of

awareness. This fact makes them inherently anchored in human memory and in remembrance activities and these two aspects' relatedness to the person's belief-systems and their relatedness to the 'wholly Other' idea. The question of 'who am I as this or that religious person?' is deeply harbored in the question of 'who was I?'. It represents as well the horizon of anticipation and envisioning of answers for the question of 'who will I become?' or even 'who would my "sacred Other" want me to transform into?' Within this framework, this article reflects on the case of the Syrian refugees in Europe and how their religious and cultural self-perceptions are connected to the challenge of forming a new answer to the question 'who am I?', which they now confront in the heart of their strife to exist in new living spaces. The article will touch upon this complicated and multifaceted matter from the specific perspective of the role of memory and remembrance in the journey of self-perception and identity-formation, which is going to be analyzed within the framework of the studies of memory's relatedness to systems of religious belief.

Concerning the methodological approach of this study, this article constitutes a second stage in a project I worked on between 2015 and 2018.[1] During these years, I developed a hermeneutic tripod operating around the three key notions of 'identity-relationality-othering'. I used this tripod in deciphering the understanding of the Syrian refugees' presence in the hosting European societies after 2015 in terms of 'crisis'. The implemented hermeneutic tripod was used in naming epistemic natures and theoretical contents related to these refugees' existence in, and interaction with, the publics of the hosting countries. This methodological instrument has proven then its ability to 1) probe the nature of the refugees' situation; 2) decipher the components of thought-forms related to the refugees and their hosting communities alike; and 3) map and re-map the webs of meaning that underpin the manners of conduct, the behavioural patterns and the down-to-earth treatments, which the people who face such challenges, opt for and rely on in approaching them.

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[1] See Najib George Awad, 'Deciphering the *Genome* of "Crisis" in the Syrian "Refugee Crisis": Towards a Hermeneutic Tripod,' in *The Church, Migration and Global (In)Difference*, eds. Darren J. Diaz, Jaroslav Z. Skira, Michael S. Attridge and Gerard Mannion (Springer Nature: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 167–199. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-54226-9_10.

This article constitutes the second chapter of the abovementioned project. I now use the very same hermeneutic tripod of 'identity-relationality-othering', moving from the narrow circle of migration-refugee studies into the broader and more interdisciplinary circle of reasoning and interpretation, where key notions and components derived from theological reasoning, religious studies, religious sociology, cultural studies, identity studies, and memory studies intertwine and interconnect. I use the same hermeneutic tripod to probe, decipher and map another aspect of the Syrian refugees' life and self-perception in the European hosting societies. This time, I expand my hermeneutic of the Syrian refugees' 'crisis-like' presence in Europe from an attentive concentration on the impacts of the theologico-religious and cultural interpretation of the notion of 'identity' and its interdisciplinary connectedness to 'relationality' and 'othering'. I achieve this by unpacking some of the meanings and implications of the phenomena of 'remembrance' on the processes of self-perception and identity-formation. The ensuing sections of the article will pursue this reflection on the identity-formation process in connection to the Syrian refugees' endeavors to re-imagine and re-construct new personal and communal religious and cultural self-perceptions that are demonstrative of their adaptation attempts in new hosting societies.

1. Theoretical framework: identity, memory and religiosity

In 2009, the lecturer at Fordham University, New York, Benjamin Dunning, produced a study on self-perception, identity-formation, and alterity in Christian antiquity.[2] Dunning relates that the earliest Christians theologically perceived themselves as 'alien outsiders and sojourners' called by God to merely wander over the earth as strangers who long for their true home in the afterlife in the kingdom of God.[3] In his investigation on the core-theological rationale that underpins this view, Dunning proposes that what was at stake for these Christians was not primarily how to emphasize their absolute otherness as 'believers in specific faith' existing within a surrounding 'non-believers' world'. They just wanted to set up a marker by means of which they can single

[2] Benjamin G. Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as Other in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 1. doi: 10.9783/9780812201819.
[3] Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*, 3.

out their faith-centered self 'over and against cultural others who are in many [human] ways too much like them [yet in as many faith-based ways very different from them].'[4] The crux of the matter, Dunning maintains, is fundamentally a preoccupation with setting up boundaries and limits to practices of self-construction and other-relatedness that maintain both one's own particularity as a human being and also one's faith-centered understanding and relatedness to the divine Wholly Other's reality.[5]

Far, however, from being an unprecedented Christian religious invention, speaking about oneself as an 'alien sojourner' was known in pre-Christian Greek philosophy (Platonic), and it was used in the literature of the parallel early Roman context (like in Plutarch's (c. 46–120 A.D.) text, *On Exile*) as well. In that literature, one finds a speech that 'depicts the human soul as a sojourner on earth that seeks its true fatherhood in heaven'.[6] The difference between such early and contemporaneous Roman references and the Christian ones is that the followers of Jesus Christ talked about themselves as aliens and sojourners because they wanted to imitate Jesus of Nazareth's particularity by 'performing their alien status not through radical practices of differentiation, but through behaving more or less like everybody else'.[7]

Dunning ultimately concludes that speaking about identity in terms of the notions of 'aliens' and 'sojourners' means that 'identity' is, by default, expressive of a state of being that is processive, just as the states of being that are expressed in the terms of 'aliens' and 'sojourners'. Dunning articulates this vis-à-vis Stuart Hall's take on identity's fluxive nature:

> Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not

[4] Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*, 5.

[5] Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*, 5. See also Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2004); and J. Z. Smith, 'What a Difference a Difference Makes,' in '*To See Ourselves as Others See Us': Christians, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 3–48.

[6] Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*, 41. See also Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. F. H. Sandback (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1927–1969), 607.

[7] Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners*, 61. See also Miroslav Volf, 'Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation between Church and Culture in 1 Peter,' in *ExAud*, 10(1994), 15–30.

> once-and-for-all. It is not fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return… it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Cultural identities are… not an essence but a *positioning*, Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'.[8]

This demonstrates that identity and self-perception are fluxive in nature even from religious and theological perspectives, not just from purely cultural ones. As Philip Wood relates, they are 'fluid and reactive; often an assertion of difference in response to a moment of [theological perception,] political stress or cultural uncertainty'.[9] This indicates that, in their historical recollected past, the religious people go through situations wherein theologizing on self-identity's particularity witnesses a shift in emphasis: From relating to the other in terms of integration, assimilation, and accommodation; into connecting to the other from the perspective of self-alienation and self-othering. The notion of 'Wholly Other' here is not only designative of the otherness of the divine Being, but also expressive of the total otherness of one human being over-against others in the name of that divine Other's 'otherness'. One must realize here that both perspectives are evenly and genuinely relational in nature. Both are rooted in correlation, not in confrontational altercations, between two sides. They are not just 'I-thou' states of relatedness but also an 'I-I' one as well. Both are grounded in attached, not segregating, states of co-existence or of relatedness to an opposite 'other', whether metaphysically (with the divine) or physically (with the human). Both manifest interaction and reciprocation with the other. What is more significant still is that both forms of otherness make self-perception and self-identification totally fluxive or fluid in nature. They turn the human subjects that are involved in them into 'sojourners' not merely through the curves of reality, but also across the history

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[8] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 233–246, 237.

[9] Philip Wood, 'Introduction,' in *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*, ed. Philip Wood (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), xi–xxii, xiii. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199915408.001.0001. See also R. Mathisen and D. Shanzer, *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); and see also the earlier discussion in Erik Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1700: Program, Myth and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). doi: 10.1017/CCOL0521439612.

of the human's relatedness to the divine; not only through life and existential presence, but also through memory and its rootedness in belief systems.

Since the first decade of the 21st century, biblical scholars in the realm of Christian theology have embraced the above-stated understanding. They started to produce studies on memory and remembrance in the Biblical attestations and to interpret them from theological and socio-anthropological perspectives. Theologians began to examine attentively the Biblical understanding of the nature of the Greek notion of '*anamnesis*' (remembrance/recollection) – which was used intensively by the fathers of the church during the first four centuries – from the perspective of the question of 'what [does] it mean to be human together in time and over time under God?'[10] For instance, in his attention to the Biblical perception of *anamnesis* (*μιμνήσκομαι/μνημονεύω*, etc.), Stephen Barton suggests that the scriptural attestation depicts a dialectic language-game that swings between 'remembrance' (*anamnesis*) and 'forgetting' or 'erasure of memory' (*amnesia*).[11] Barton pauses at Paul the Apostle's stance on memory in relation to self-perception, especially in his expression 'in Christ Jesus' (*εν χριστώ Ιησού*), which one finds, for example, in Ephesians 1:1 & 2:6, 13; Corinthians 4:15; Romans 6:11 & 16:3; and Galatians 3:26. In the Pauline literature, Barton notices, this idea of 'remembering in relation to God' connotes a state of being, a state of self-awareness, or an identity. It is not merely a title or a mystical experiential situation.[12]

In his similar attentiveness to the notion of 'remembrance' (the sense of *μνημονεύειν*/commemoration included) and its use in the New Testament's Pauline and non-Pauline texts, Bruce Morrill also highlights the connection between the notion of 'memory in relation to God' and identity-formation and self-perception processes. Morrill states the following on the Pauline and other New Testament's senses

[10] Stephen C. Barton, 'Memory and Remembrance in Paul,' in *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity: The Fifth Durham-Tübingen Research Symposium (Durham, September 2004)*, eds. Stephen C. Barton, Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Benjamin G. Wold (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 321–340, 322.

[11] Barton, 'Memory and Remembrance in Paul,' 324.

[12] See a similar attention in Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Asheleigh E. Moorhouse (London: The Faith Press/Bangor, ME: American Orthodox Press, 1966), 50; 85; 99; and Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, Min: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

of 'memory': '[Remembrance is not merely] recalling or recollection of its object (as Aristotle defines remembrance), but also a processive, subjective thinking and involvement, both cognitively and experientially. Here, remembrance exceeds mere recollection, and it becomes 'integrally related to one's present thought and decisions for action'.[13] On this understanding specifically, Stephen Barton once commented by relating that Paul develops a particular 'epistemology at the turn of the Ages'.[14] Here, 'the turn of the ages' means the moment of the human transformation from old self-awareness into a new self-perceptivity. It is a moment of forming a new identity, so to speak. In this sense, Paul does not attach self-perception to remembrance alone. He also connects it to a state of erasing the memory of old things. To say this in theological terms, he not only relates it to *anamnesis*, but also to *amnesia*. Within this theological rationale, identifying oneself within a new state of being equally demands 'disjunction, rupture, [and] transformation.'[15]

2. Syrian refugees between memory and religio-cultural self-perception

How is the above theological understanding related to the self-perception process of the Syrian refugees' relatedness to their new hosting societies in Europe? Answering this question invites us to travel beyond the narrow boundaries of classical theological reasoning towards the circle of interdisciplinary reasoning that is pertinent to the overlap between theology and socio-cultural realms of understanding. This is why, in this section, I turn to the realm of sociological religiosity and anthropology that are directly related to Refugee Studies and Memory Studies alike.

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[13] Morrill, *Anamnesis*, 146–147. See also Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976).

[14] Barton, 'Memory and Remembrance in Paul,' 328.

[15] Barton, 'Memory and Remembrance in Paul,' 328. See also Markus Bockmuehl, 'New Testament Wirkungsgeschichte and the Early Christian Appeal to Living Memory,' in *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity*, 341–368, 345; John Lukacs, *The Historical Consciousness: The Remembered Past* (New Brunswick & London: Transaction, 1994); and Donald A Yerxa and Karl W. Giberson, 'Vegetables Don't Have a History: A conversation with Historian John Luckacs,' *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 6, no. 14 (2000): www.booksandculture.com/articles/2000/julaug/6.14.html (accessed 14 March 2024).

When people from different cultural backgrounds sojourn searching for a new 'home' and they settle, eventually, in a new land, among new people, under new human existential conditions, their instinctive, primordial, and often protectionist reaction mechanisms and attitudes (in their theological and religious depths indeed) manifest a resilient mode of suspicion, fear, resistance, and even rejection, not merely of the relatedness or non-relatedness to God which others manifest, but equally of the cultural identity and webs of meaning which they see operating within the host community's *Sitz im Leben*. This form of protectionist self-alienation might take religious, cultural, or religio-cultural forms and ramifications. This would be the case even when the new refugees and the hosting communities share the very same religious worldview (e.g., both deem the notion of 'God' central to their understanding of reality), or theological, faith-based perception of reality (e.g. both are Christian in background and believe in Jesus Christ). This would also be the case when both sides happen to share two cultural identities that hold many common and harmonious features and value systems. The tense and fracturing altercation between the hosted and the hosting circles of existence, be it religious/theological only or cultural/societal alone, can fairly be deemed inevitable and inescapable.

The central question in the abovementioned situation is, why does this outcome tend to be the case? It is my conviction that this 'fraction due to otherness' is not necessarily rooted in, or generated from, religiosity or culture as such. It is grounded in the strife of the refugees (the 'alienated sojourners' in their religious self-imagination) for re-imagining, and even re-inventing, their identity or self-understanding in new life-conditions. The interesting and intriguing thing here is that they travel through such a striving journey in the heart of a parallel striving process, which their new living context's people sojourn through in their equal endeavor to refigure their own identity and selfhood in the light of the hosting societies' inflection with newly residing strangers. What turns this process of self-identification on both campaigns into an unknown, dangerous, and daunting journey, rather than a stable, smooth trip, is the fact that the newcomers and the hosts alike delve, volitionally or unwillingly, into inquiring 'who am I now?' The newcomers and the hosts alike find themselves arriving at this question through their inquiry about the past: 'Who was I before I came here (refugee)?', or 'Who was I before I welcomed these strangers in my land (host)?'. This inquisition demonstrates

a connectedness between identity and memory/remembrance; not only on the religious and metaphysical levels of theological reasoning, but also on the profoundly existential and praxis-centered ones of cultural reasoning as well.

It is because of this that the past two-and-a-half decades (from 2010 onwards) witnessed a rapidly growing interest in 'Memory Studies' among theologians and sociologists, and we started to witness a renewed attention to classical research on remembrance.[16] A considerable number of scholars from theological studies, religious studies and social sciences vouch today for the vitality of studying the phenomenon of 'remembrance' in relation to 'how groups and societies create and sustain a sense of who they are and how they want to be locating themselves in relation to time, especially past time.'[17] These scholars realize that, in their perpetual, volitional or obligatory, re-discernment of the fundamental question 'who am I?', human refugees and natives alike do not inquire outside time or space. Memory and remembrance play a substantial role in pursuing identity-formation processes on a broad horizon of temporality.[18]

Be that as it may, if the Syrian refugees, who have inhabited European societies since 2015 and who hail from overwhelmingly diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, are subjects, perpetrators, or victims of societal tensions and conflicts in their host life-settings, this conflictual situation is not primarily symptomatic of religious or cultural resilience that is expressed in defensive behavior or cognitive violence. It, rather, digs its roots far more deeply in these Syrians' recent, almost eliminative, struggle with a remembrance-centered process of

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[16] Barton, 'Memory and Remembrance in Paul,' 321. See also Steven Rose, '"You Must Remember This": Review of Douwe Draaisma, *Why Life Speeds Up AS You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004),' in *The Guardian*, Saturday, 11 December, 2004. Barton also refers to the important work on memory from the field of social sciences and historiographical studies of Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992). doi: 10.7208/chicago/9780226774497.001.0001. See also studies of memory in the areas of cultural geographical studies, archaeology and psychology, like K. Hodgkin and S. Radstone (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003). doi: 10.4324/9780203391471; Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,' in *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125–135. doi: 10.2307/488538; and Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). doi: 10.4159/9780674040595.

[17] S. C. Barton, L. T. Stuckenbruck and B. G. Wold, 'Introduction,' in *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity*, 1–8.

[18] Barton, Stuckenbruck and Wold, 'Introduction,' 2.

self-reflection, which they resorted to as an attempt to recollect what kind of humans they were back home. They escaped into this cocoon because they are desperately longing for finding in this self-perception secure and reassuring answers to the inquiry 'who am I today, and where will this take me in the future?'. This is not necessarily a purely religious or theological cognition journey. For the Christians, the Muslims, and the non-religious among the Syrians are equally blown by the same identity-formation hurricane. They struggle with it regardless of their belief systems, theological imaginations, the faith traditions they hail from, as well as the belief systems their hosting societies uphold and identify with. On the other hand, this is not a culturally loaded quest, for Syrians of widely diverse cultural backgrounds encounter the very same fate, and they equally try to handle the very same demands.

Principally speaking, the existence of conspicuous nuances among the Syrian individuals in their self-perception-via-remembrance journey is natural and needs no further comment. However, on the communal level, the distinction between one Syrian group's practice of this self-reidentification process and another group lies in the specific narratives, traditions, metaphysical imaginations (theologies), and experiential histories, wherein each group grounds its memories and each shapes its remembering activities thereafter. One has to pause at these discrepancies and to ponder the seriousness of the possibility that, when it comes to identity-perception and identity-formation in relation to remembrance, an expression like 'collective memory' becomes truly redundant, if not artificial. There are serious grounds for rejecting Emil Durkheim's reduction of individual consciousness and thinking, his preconditioning of it by socially collectivist existence, as well as his proposal that human individuals develop self-awareness reflectively (not reflexively) in dependence on socio-collectivist determinations. I fully concur with Jerrold Siegel's skepticism towards 'every attempt to portray thinking as wholly absorbed into, or dominated by, some set of social relations.'[19]

[19] Jerrold Siegel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511818141. See also Michelle Rosaldo, 'Toward an Anthropology of Self and Feeling,' in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion*, eds. R. A. Shweder and R. A. LeVine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 137–157; and Emile Durkheim, *On Morality and Society*, ed. Robert Bellah, trans. Charles Blend (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1973).

A more plausible and realistic alternative to 'collectiveness' would circle, instead, around thinking of 'common events', 'common matters', or even 'common experiences; which may have been "known" to a community'.[20] People will not hold *collective* memory even if they subscribed to the very same religious imagination, theological reasoning, or the same cultural background. They will always shape their identities and self-perception through different ways of remembering their common belief systems, cultural backgrounds, and their interpretations of both. To the Syrian refugees, but also their European hosts, as I believe, applies also the fact that 'we can [merely] speak of a range of various kinds of memories in real historical groups'.[21] The variety of the forms and contents of memorization stands as a realistic, down-to-earth demonstration of the mistaken presumption that 'subjectivity can be wholly formed by, or absorbed into, social and cultural relations.' Such presumption breeds only unsustainable forms of integration that fail to take into consideration not just 'the complexity and intricacy of human culture and language,'[22] but also the diversity and nebulous nature of human remembrance and self-perception. The human being comes to know a living system via 'mindful interaction' and by means of acting not like a disciple, but also like 'a *judge*,' as Emmanuel Kant confirmed centuries ago.[25] A similar situation is applicable to those refugees who came from one, single religious and cultural sphere as well: 'Who I am' as someone hailing from the particular religio-cultural contexts of Syria would also be determined through a broad range of alternative microcosmic memories that are quite diverse in their identity-creating capacities and results. This will be the case despite the fact that the five million Syrian refugees who have gone to Europe and other parts of the world since 2015,[24] equally fled from their country

[20] Doron Mendels, 'Societies of Memory in the Graeco-Roman World,' in *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity*, 143–162, 143.

[21] Mendels, 'Societies of Memory,' 144. See also Doron Mendels, *Memory in Jewish, Pagan and Christian Societies of the Graeco-Roman World* (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2004); and Jan Assmann, *Religion und Kulturelles Gedächtnis* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2000).

[22] Siegel, *The Idea of the Self*, 22.

[25] Siegel, *The Idea of the Self*, 23. See also Martin Hollis, 'Of Masks and Men,' in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, eds. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lujes (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 217–233.

[24] Ahmad Barakat, 'The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Global Security Threats – a case Study of Germany,' in *Syria Studies* 15, no. 2 (2023): 1–34.

driven by an instinctive survival attempt from the common catastrophic crisis, which the entire Syrian population equally endured. No wonder that, once in his *Republic*, Plato attacks '*collective* memory' (as imitation and mimicry), and he forbids it in his utopic city-state imagination. Plato deems collective memory merely a worthless entertainment for those who do not know the truth, thus he calls for banishing it from the *Republica*.[25]

Such skepticism towards 'collective memory' is plausible, I reckon, particularly in relation to the case study of this article. It stands against turning memory into an instrument for creating a collectivist self-perception or identity-formation that is controlled by, and shaped after, ideological, discriminative, and radically otherizing preconceptions. Such ideologized otherness is not symptomatic of the refugee groups (the Syrians in this case) alone. It is as effectively prominent in the hosting societies, whose members tend to promote and defend a static, collectivist cultural identity that is equally based on a mythical imagination. It is important here to realize that, in their turn, the hosting communities are equally clinging to a collective memory in their zeal to defend and protect their imagined mono-cultural identity from the fantasized 'hazardous' impacts of the newly coming Syrian 'alien sojourners'. Both states of self-perception by means of remembrance (in the case of the religio-cultural identity of the refugees and that of the hosting societies alike) do not seem to take into consideration that memory is also embedded in a natural process of selectivity, which creates a space for a benign distortion inherent to the process itself. Here, 'distortion' does not necessarily breed negative, detrimental consequences. It is just an articulate expression of a natural tendency within the attempt of human recollection to 'distort the past, to render it intelligibly to the present… [or to lean towards] distorting uninteresting shapes into interesting abstractions'.[26] In other words, both the identifi-

[25] Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 971–1223, X.598.b.c-606.b-c (1202–1206); X.607.b-d (1211). This, Plato sees manifested in poetry as the ideal expression of collectivity. So, he bluntly criticizes Homer and his poetic legacy.

[26] Anthony Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion in the Jesus Tradition: A Study in Social Memory Theory,' in *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity*, 163–177, 167. See also Michael Kommen, 'Some Patterns and Meanings of Memory Distortion in American History,' in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel Schachter (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 329–345.

cation which the Syrians make of themselves as 'Muslims or Christians from the Syrian world', as well as what the Europeans say about their own belief-cultural identities as 'Christian/Jews/secular/non-religious from the French/English/German/Czech cultural heritage', are equally erected upon certain connectedness to historical memory, which includes within it a considerable extent of distortion (one that must not be confused with non-historicity).[27]

3. Syrians re-inventing themselves in Europe

The Syrian refugees who ended up trying to establish a new life in the European context (others among them are still imprisoned in a limbo of oblivion and confusion) found themselves confronted with a more primordial inquiry: 'Whom are you going to become?' This question-like expectation was addressed to the Syrian refugees by the hosting populations, to whom, ironically enough, the concept of 'identity' seems equally to form an integral part of their self-perception. The irony here lies in that, while the European hosting societies were strictly expecting the refugees to compromise their diverse religious and cultural legacies and fully adopt and integrate into European religio-cultural value systems and webs of meaning, these European publics – contrary to what some of their academic elites and intellectuals have relatively recently conceded[28] – have quite rarely apprehended that the very notion of 'identity', be it religious or cultural, 'has become an increasingly problematic concept,' and it breeds dire suspicions about whether 'it is still possible to speak in an intellectually responsible way about identity', in the first place.[29]

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[27] Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion in the Jesus Tradition: A Study in Social Memory Theory,' 176.

[28] For some texts that demonstrate a recent, still elitist attentiveness to the challenge of identity in the European context, see Christophe Venet and Blandina Barnes (eds.), *European Identity Through Space: Space Activities and Programs as a Tool to Reinvigorate the European Identity* (Wien: Springer, 2013); Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *European Identity* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511806247; Ines Maria Gomez-Chacon (ed.), *European Identity: Individual, Group and Society* (Bilbao: University of Deusto, 2003); and Neil Fligstein, *Euro-Clash: The EU, European Identity and the Future of Europe* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[29] Awad, 'Deciphering the *Genome* of "Crisis",' 169. See also Jaco Kruger, 'Christian Identification in an Age of Difference,' in *Christian Identity*, ed. Eduardus Van der Borght (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2008), 119–132, 119. doi: 10.1163/ej.9789004158061.i-514.58.

The Syrian refugees were requested to abandon their cultural, religious, and non-religious identities and to integrate into the European ones of their hosting societies, so that they demonstrate that their presence in the hosting context is not going to result in backlash and turn into a potential source of crisis and disturbance to public peace and stability. However, the hosting publics seem to have forgotten, or maybe ignored, that 'since the 1990s, questions like "who is the European?", or "what does it mean to be European?" can no longer be answered clearly or collectively'.[30] This, as I diagnosed back between 2015 and 2018, is not just the case on the macrocosmic level, but also on the level of the microcosmic strife for finding 'coherent and unifying national identities: What is French? What is German? What is Italian? What is Dutch? And so on.'[31] The need for re-apprehending oneself and re-forming one's identity is as challenging and tormenting for the refugees' relation to their religio-cultural imagination as it is for the hosting European populations.

It is my reckoning that the crux of the ambiguity of the 'European identities' and the 'Syrian identities' concepts is grounded in the fact that both sides construct their understandings of identity and self-perception upon historical, artificial collectivist memory that is either overtly presumptive or false, and it has no anchor in present realities and conditions. Both sides seem to be tailoring the costume of their allegedly definitive cultural biography by means of either *anamnesis* (remembrance) or *amnesia* (forgetfulness); by either imposing something or by erasing another. The hosts cling to 'European' identities that are shaped after a recollection of a selectively invoked Judeo-Christian past, and they hardly reminisce about the genuinely *Muslim* niche of that history (There are indigenous Muslim Europeans since at least the 15th century). They lean, instead, towards erasing this Islam, and they prefer to forget it.

On the other hand, the Syrian refugees defend a 'Syrian' identity that is shaped after one of two tendencies related to memory. The first tendency emphasizes remembering the Syrian near past's histories of suffering, torture, death, displacement, deracination, and persecution, which coerced millions of them since 2012 to abandon their homeland and to end up either congregated in refugees' camps on the borderlines

[30] Awad, 'Deciphering the *Genome* of "Crisis",' 169.
[31] Awad, 'Deciphering the *Genome* of "Crisis",' 170.

with neighboring countries, or escaping to, and sheltering in, foreign lands overseas. For these people, their religio-cultural self-perception and other-awareness alike are shaped by a profound sense of introverted and desolated self-pity; of utter distrust in any other; of dire victimhood; of pathological self-alienation, of protectionist isolationism and of xenophobia. The remembrance of their crisis becomes constitutive of their appraisal of what they can *do* and what they can, or they are allowed to, *be* or *become*.

The second tendency related to remembrance drifts Syrian refugees into a deliberate state of denial that is driven by forgetfulness: They consciously and psychologically determine to erase (in the sense of oblivious denial) the memory of the latest Syrian catastrophe along with their personal dehumanization and suffering in it. They root their self-perception and relatedness to reality, instead, in an *overleaping* memory grounded in a passionate, euphoric longing for a historical, remote past, which goes way back before the Syrian crisis that started in 2011. These Syrians stretch their emotions, minds, and *psyches* backwards and retrospectively, toward a fantasized, glorious, almost fabricated, and self-elevating old cultural and religious 'golden era', when, as they remorsefully eulogize, a superior, glorious, idealist 'Syria' once existed, and they lived in it in idealized peace, harmony, prosperity, security, stability, plenitude, fraternity, and flourishing. Here, we have a case of forgetfulness that lies in an alternative perception shaped after a false memory, since the Syria of the past half-century (the Syria of the dictatorial, tyrannical al-Asad regimes' era), to which the predominant majority of the Syrian refugees belong (and I personally grew up in), has never been at any time that 'Paradise Eden' which they tend to remember it to be, and it has never existed in reality.

What such a self-perception and self-identification strategy rooted in manipulation and falsification of memory generates is a stance of aloofness, self-otherizing, and excessive resistance to integration, and defensive-apologetic tension towards the hosting societies. This otherness in terms of contrariety becomes these refugees' desperate means for protecting and defending what they preconceive as superior, far more perfect, and valuable religio-cultural heritage. They try to remain remote from what such a false, superior memory drives them to treat and deem as inferior, less valuable, lowly cultural alternative, which they now over-project on the hosting societies. When they gather together to exchange life's stories and testimonies in their new societies,

these refugees might entertain very common, cliché-like catchwords, like 'I long for my life in Syria'; 'I used to have a life better than here in Syria', 'our society was more relationally and socially amalgamated and cohesive than the fragmented, dispersed societies here', 'people in these societies are morally degenerate, opposite to how society was in Syria', 'people here despise faith and religious values. I wish I could enjoy the Syrian religious sensibility here', etc., etc.

In the abovementioned twofold orientation towards relating to memory, the Syrian refugees rely on remembrance in their involvement in self-perception and identity-formation processes. In either manifested tendency, they pursue this identity-formation process in the heart of a life-setting, which includes host populations that are equally drowned in similar processes of self-perception and identity-formation that are rooted in the very same abovementioned two tendencies towards memory's dual nature: Remembrance (*anamnesis*), and calculated forgetfulness or erasure (*amnesia*).

My present extended investigation of the Syrian refugees' adaptability to their hosting European contexts from the angle of 'identity' within religious/theological imagination brings me back with confidence to the diagnosis I developed in my 2015–2018 research:

> European communities, on one side, and Syrian refugees, on another, are both facing existential crises and both are striving to develop new, more relevant and contextually coherent identities… both… meet with similar confusing struggles that they must deal with and attend to… both sides need to review their understanding of 'identity' and transform it into a realization of the fact that identity [religious and cultural ones included] is multi-faceted and fluid in nature, never static or monolithic.[32]

Some concluding remarks

In this article, I tried to demonstrate that the question of the Syrian refugees' presence in Europe must not primarily be determined by exploring whether they can prove their adaptability, or reveal their lack of adaptability, to its religio-cultural contexts and values. It must

[32] 'Deciphering the *Genome* of "Crisis",' 172. See also Gilles Deleuze, *Kleine Schriften*, trans. K. D. Schacht (Berlin: Minerva, 1980); and G. Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University, 2002).

be approached by exploring tenable answers to the questions: 'Adaptability to what exactly?' and 'adaptability to this "whatness" as whom precisely?' It is essentially an inquiry about identity, and when it comes to identity, the chronometric constituents of the identity-formation process are certainly memory and remembrance.

In the field of ethnomethodology, scholars construct a myriad of categorizing labels to describe people and define them. Some of these categories are useful; others are not always relevant, especially to the theological and religious reasoning on identity formation. In any case, this triggers the general question: 'Which categories become relevant in an ongoing course of action, why they are made relevant, and why at this very moment?' This can also reveal that 'the analyses of categories, of relations between categories, and of conclusions people draw from these categories, elucidate a significant part of mundane sense-making and reasoning.'[33]

I point to this 'categorization' strategy here because European publics also define the Syrian refugees by means of various religious and cultural categories, some of which might be relevant, yet others might just be impositions, aiming at confining these refugees to premeditated, stereotypical imagination about their cultural and religious identities. The danger in such categories-centered ethnomethodological identification is that it may treat such categories as 'fixed identities', or static identifying qualifications or nature. Here, the religio-cultural identifying constituents transform into instruments of racial and ideological otherizing that are as confining to the hosting society as they will be to the refugees. The call for adaptability, in this case, boxes the hosting public in a static self-otherizing *habitus* that lies in imposing ontological contrariety with, and antagonistic segregation from, the alien other. This will not just manifest in defensive, hostile, and ideologized identity. It will also make adaptability expressive of a self-perception state that is rooted in falsehood and delusion.

The understanding of remembrance in relation to self-perception, other-perception, and identity-formation processes teaches us that

[33] Daniel H. Rellstab, 'Refugee? No Refugee? Categorizations of Migrants in the Wake of the Arab Spring in Swiss Online News and Comments,' in *Representations of War, Migration and Refugeehood: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Danile H. Rellstab and Christine Schlote (New York & London: Routledge, 2015), 109–139, 114. doi: 10.4324/9781315884370. See also Carly W. Butler, *Talk and Social Interaction in the Playground* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008).

remembrance, or forgetfulness for that matter, can sometimes lead the person to either fanatically cling to a preconceived and imagined superior cultural or religious identity, or to extravagantly demonize and degrade the other's religio-cultural identifying bearers. In this case, self-perception not only loses its fluxive, processive, and open-ended scope. It also turns identity-formation and re-creation attempts into affairs that are grounded in 'dangerous memory', to borrow a term once conjured by Johann Baptist Metz (yet here, this memory is dangerous in a destructive sense).[34]

The Syrian refugees in Europe either manifest various forms of desperate resort to remembrance of their, still fresh, suffering and trauma in Syria's war, or, they express an escapism from that trauma by sheltering in a memory of an imagined pre-war, metahistorical, and utopian Syria. On the other hand, their hosting European societies are overwhelmingly haunted by their judgmental and prejudiced clinging to a remembered, referential, equally supra-historical and almost mythological European, Judeo-Christian identity and 'origin narrative.' It is my belief that both sides need to avoid the impasse of such 'dangerous memory' by emancipating their self-perceptions from conformism, glorification, or essentialization. They both need to beware of the dangerous memory that seems 'deprived of all future', as Johann Baptist Metz once related. Such memory, Metz argues, 'can easily become a "false consciousness" of our past and an opiate for our present.'[35] Within the abyss of such meta-historical memorization, designated identities turn into mere rigidly defined nomenclatures with nebulous content.

Would the Syrian refugees one day adapt to the new cultural and societal sphere of existence they try to belong to? This article suggests that the complexity of the question of self-perceptivity and memory invites us to realize that any integration-expectation shaped after fixed forms of cultural and religious/theological premeditated self-perception and supra-historical identities would be doomed to failure on the practical and behavioural levels of existence alike. Human beings'

[34] See Johann Baptist Metz, 'Communicating Dangerous Memory,' in *Communicating Dangerous memory: Studies in Political Theology*, ed. Fred Lawrence (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 37–54. doi: 10.5840/lw19876Supplement4. See also J. B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 88–118.

[35] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 109.

capacity for independence enables them to always be other than who they are, provided that this capacity is not predetermined and dictated, but lived and practiced in genuine independence.[36]

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[36] Siegel, *The Idea of the Self*, 25. See also Clifford Geertz, 'The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind,' in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books/Perseus Books Group, 1973), 55–86.